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SUBJECT: CHINA'S ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS GENDER IMBALANCE PROBLEM

REF: A) BEIJING 0017 B) 08 BEIJING 2808 C) 08 BEIJING 2795

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Abnormally high sex ratio at birth (SRB) and excess female child mortality both contribute directly to the sex ratio imbalance in China. Social consequences of this imbalance include an estimated excess of over 30 million unmarried males, a potentially destabilizing force that threatens to cause unrest in the most economically marginalized areas, and could lead to increased gender violence through demand for prostitution and trafficking in girls and women. While there is general agreement on sex-selective abortions and post-natal discrimination as the leading causes of China's abnormally high sex ratio imbalance, these actions are motivated by the interaction of a strong cultural preference and pressure for sons with China's strict birth limitation policy.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY CONTINUED: While the government has made reducing the gender imbalance an urgent priority, sources indicate that the long term deadlines set for normalizing the sex ratio may be further delayed. Controlling prenatal sex identification and sex-selective abortions has been a leading strategy in managing the sex ratio imbalance. Since 2006, China has also broadened its efforts to include more comprehensive and coordinated approaches to better address the root causes of the problem. However, government efforts to reduce the sex ratio imbalance have thus far steadfastly avoided any major changes to its birth limitation policy. END SUMMARY.

SOCIAL UNREST FROM SEX RATIO IMBALANCE

¶3. (SBU) The long term consequences of China's high sex ratio imbalance are worrisome to China's social planners. The abnormally high sex ratio imbalance can lead to social problems that follow from a shortage of women to marry. An April 2009 British Medical Journal study analyzing the sex ratio for China's population under the age of 20 found that there are over 32 million more males than females, triggering a series of stories in the domestic and international media about the problem of China's "bare branches," or young men who cannot find partners. According to population experts, women will be able to marry up and out into wealthier and more urban areas, so the problem of excess males will be felt most acutely in the poorest and most marginal regions, possibly compounding other social and economic discontent. Former Director of China Population and Development Research Center (CPDRC) MA Li told ESTHoffs that there is currently no strategy to deal with the "bare branches" phenomenon, but since the problem is "far off," the priority now is to reduce the sex ratio imbalance at birth. (NOTE: CPDRC is the main research arm of the National Population and Family Planning Commission (NPFPC) and assists the NPFPC in strategic planning feeding into their Five-Year Population Development Plans. Ma is also a long-standing Deputy in the National People's Congress (NPC) and a member of NPC's Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee. END NOTE)

(SBU) Gender equity advocates also speculate that the growing imbalance could lead to more serious gender discrimination and gender violence. Increased demand for sex workers and shortage of women to marry could lead to more trafficking of girls and women for

future brides or the sex industry.

NO LONGER A "SECRET" PROBLEM

¶4. (SBU) Both government and non-governmental sources have noted the increasing willingness of the government to discuss the sex ratio problem openly. In a November 30 meeting with the CPDRC, former Director MA Li described to ESTH officers the gradual opening up of the problem to public discourse. According to Ma, after years of treating the sex ratio imbalance as a "secret" problem, the government publicly acknowledged the problem for the first time in 2002 and made sex ratio data publicly available in 2004. Especially since 2006, when the government made the gender imbalance problem a national priority, there has been a high level of domestic and international attention paid to and research conducted on the issue, including open discussion of previously sensitive subjects such as sex-selective abortion and the link to China's social policies.

¶5. (SBU) In recent separate meetings with United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNFPA's Deputy Representative Mariam Khan and UNICEF's Chief of Plans of Action and Promotion of Child Rights Lisa Ng Bow both characterized a growing readiness by the government to examine disaggregated data by gender as a major shift, on key indicators like infant and child mortality. This is significant because these are indicators for which China is showing considerable progress overall, but when disaggregated by gender, show serious disadvantage to girls in child survival. (REF A)

FAMILY PLANNING POLICY WORSENS GENDER BIAS

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¶6. (SBU) Public discourse on the issue has resulted in increased scrutiny on the impact of China's social policies on its sex ratio. For example, Professor HU Yukun of Peking University's (PKU) Institute of Population Research was quick to point out to ESTHOffs in a November 20 meeting that although the official family planning policy has loosened somewhat in recent years to allow over half of families to have a second child if the first one is a girl (known as the one-and-a-half child policy), a fertility policy conditioned on the sex of the first child still caters to the cultural preference for sons and implies that sons and daughters are not equivalent. Hu explained that the policy worsens the sex ratio imbalance because not only can families who bear sons not have another child, but many who have a girl first will likely use sex selection to ensure they have a boy next. The policy also reinforces the social concept that girls are inferior to boys. The April 2009 British Medical Journal study on the sex ratio of China's population under 20 years of age presented findings showing that one-and-a-half child policy areas have the highest overall sex ratios. (NOTE: According to China's national data, the SRB was 120.56 in 2008 (REF A), although the CIA World Factbook reports an estimated SRB of 110 for 2009, presenting a less severe picture of China's sex ratio imbalance at birth. For other areas sharing a common cultural tradition of son preference, the CIA World Factbook estimates comparable SRB for 2009: 109 in Taiwan, 108 in Hong Kong, 107 in South Korea, and 107 in Vietnam. END NOTE)

GOALS FOR NORMALIZING SEX IMBALANCE FURTHER DELAYED

¶7. (SBU) While China has made solving the sex ratio problem an increasingly urgent priority, the central government has struggled to meet its own goals for normalizing the sex ratio imbalance. The current Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) and Long Term Plans for 2020 divided strategic gender imbalance goals into three stages--slowing the rate of increase of the sex ratio at birth by 2010, reducing the imbalance by 2015, and normalizing the sex ratio at birth by 2020. These goals are a revision of the original deadline announced by President HU Jintao at the 2004 National People's Congress, which set a goal of normalizing the SRB by 2010.

18. (SBU) According to CPDRC's Ma, the government may soon be issuing further revisions in its timeline for normalizing the SRB. Ma reported that details are still being vetted internally, but CPDRC's recommendation to the NPFPC will be to set a goal of reducing the SRB by three points by 2015 and normalizing the SRB by 2030.

BIRTH LIMITATION POLICY WILL NOT CHANGE

19. (SBU) Despite the growing pressure to reduce the SRB, CPDRC's Ma emphatically declared that there will not be a change in the fundamentals of China's family planning policy and its commitment to maintaining a low total fertility rate for the long term. Ma did not, however, dismiss outright the possibility of the birth limitation policy being loosened over time to a general two-child policy. NPFPC's Care for Girls Leadership Committee has already included among its priorities the elimination of birth spacing restrictions, a key component of China's family planning policy, as one way to address the sex ratio imbalance. (REF C)

FAILURE TO CRIMINALIZE PRENATAL SEX SELECTION

10. (SBU) According to Ma, because of China's commitment to its birth limitation policy, the government has concentrated its initial efforts on fighting the practice of sex selection. Although she acknowledged that efforts to control the SRB by prohibiting the use of ultrasounds for fetal sex identification and sex-selective abortions have been ineffective and nearly impossible to implement (REF A), Ma also argued that for now, improving enforcement on these regulations is all the government can do in the short term. She added that a lasting solution would not be possible without a comprehensive social security system and a transformation of cultural beliefs and customs "which will take years, if not generations" to achieve.

11. (SBU) NPFPC has been trying for years to criminalize illegal sex identification and sex-selective abortion (commonly referred to as the "Two Nons"), which currently are prohibited only under administrative law. If successful, this would mean jail time for violators instead of simply fines and suspended licenses. Ma noted that she has been working on the issue of legal reform related to sex-selective abortion since its inception and has herself proposed amendments to the Criminal Code to the National People's Congress (NPC) dealing with sex-selective abortion each year since 2006. She explained, however, that attempts to criminalize the "Two Nons" are likely to continue to fail for two key reasons: 1) because many

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believe that even if successful, the burden of proof will be too difficult, rendering the law useless, and 2) because many NPC deputies disagree with the premise, believing that it is a woman or couple's right to choose whether or not to have a child, for whatever reason. While Ma feels strongly that enforcing regulations against the "Two Nons" is the only means of reducing the SRB in the short term, she also questioned its urgency and speculated that if China eventually moves to a two-child policy, the prevalence of sex selective abortions likely would be less and the sex ratio imbalance less acute. She added, however, that the public also could shift to using sex selection to ensure one boy and one girl in each family.

NEW SOCIAL SUPPORTS TARGET ROOT CAUSES OF SON PREFERENCE

12. (SBU) In December 2006, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China released a key "Decision on Fully Enhancing the Population and Family Planning Program and Comprehensively Addressing Population Issues (REF C)," which made "comprehensively addressing the abnormal sex ratio to avoid negative impacts on stability of society" a core population and family planning priority. The "Decision" not only emphasized that sex identification of the fetus and non-medical sex-selective abortions are strictly forbidden and called for setting up systems to regulate access to these services and report offenses, it also broadened government efforts beyond regulatory controls, to include a more systemic approach for targeting the root causes of son preference

and bias against girls. Furthermore, SRB was listed for the first time in 2006 as an indicator in China's annual "Statistical Communiqué," allowing the government to track the problem on an annual basis.

¶13. (SBU) The year 2006 also saw the beginning of several important national programs that addressed critical social welfare and security concerns across China. The central government moved toward full exemption of all tuition and textbook fees and provided a subsidy for school boarding for compulsory education in western China, which was later expanded to all poor families nationwide in ¶2007. According to PKU's Professor HU, this was a "dramatic triumph" for girls' rights achieved through a social policy intervention that, almost overnight, removed the practical barriers to girls from low income families attending school.

¶14. (SBU) China's broadest family planning subsidy currently is the Social Support Program (REF B). Implemented nationally in 2006, it gives a monthly stipend to those who comply with family planning regulations and is seen as a key step in addressing rural old-age social security concerns, which has been a key factor driving the son preference. Hu believes that adequately providing for old-age social security will over time reduce the reliance on sons for old-age support and soften the view that daughters are a liability.

CARE FOR GIRLS CAMPAIGN

¶15. (SBU) In addition to these social policies that appear to have improved opportunities for girls, the government in 2006 expanded nationwide the Care for Girls campaign (initially piloted in 2003 in 24 counties) which includes a range of policies ostensibly tailored to local conditions to counter gender imbalance. These include allowing inheritance by females, strategies to crack down on the "Two Nons," preferential policies to help girls in families without a son, and advocacy and education to promote cultural change away from a preference for having sons. Among other preferential policies such as education, medical, and employment benefits for girl-only families, some localities have extended the Social Support Program benefits to include even two-girl families under the Care for Girls Program, attempting to reinforce the value of girls in contributing to old age security. A less conventional related strategy has been the promotion of matrilocal marriage, where the man marries into the woman's family.

¶16. (SBU) Another key component of the Care for Girls program has been the establishment of family planning and reproductive health services to follow women from pregnancy through postnatal check-ups. The intent is to encourage better monitoring of pregnancies and births to improve survival rates, more accurate reporting of births and deaths, as well as careful regulation and registration of medicines and abortion services.

¶17. (SBU) According to UNFPA's Khan, because money for social programs and services in different sectors is controlled at different levels of government and mostly funded locally, another important aspect of the campaign is improved leadership and coordination on resources across government departments. To incentivize local leadership to provide more support for Care for Girls, some provinces have linked local officials' performance evaluations to improving the sex ratio.

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¶18. (SBU) Khan also noted that to date, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the Care for Girls Program to determine its results or pinpoint effective strategies. She explained that while UNFPA's gender advocacy strategy includes sex ratio at birth as a thematic focus, its programs are not directly part of Care for Girls. UNFPA has, however, commissioned research focused on understanding the factors that reduce the sex ratio, including an ongoing study of seven provinces--Henan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Sichuan, Chongqing and Hunan--that have shown some decline in SRB since 2007. Khan anticipates that this study will be completed in ¶2010.

¶19. (SBU) In 2008, the NPFPC established a special coordinating office to deal with the sex ratio issue. The NPCPC convened through this coordinating office two national conferences on Care for Girls (in November 2008 and August 2009) that have showcased provincial efforts in Care for Girls and attempted to motivate provinces to develop new plans and regulations for reducing the sex ratio imbalance.

¶20. (SBU) In preparation for the first National Conference on Care for Girls in Hainan province in November 2008, eleven provinces performed research studies on their efforts to manage the sex ratio imbalance. The conference highlighted in particular the success of Hainan Province's comprehensive Management and Reporting Model. Five additional provinces--Henan, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei and Hunan--whose SRBs were among the top ten highest in 2005, were chosen to pilot Hainan's model in 2009. (NOTE: Hainan Province had the third highest SRB in 2000 and showed the second greatest reduction in SRB of any province from 2000 to 2005, when it dropped to tenth. END NOTE)

¶21. (SBU) Key characteristics of Hainan's Management and Reporting Model include increasing coordinated data collection and management systems to monitor birth and death registrations and data sharing across the health, public security, and education bureaus to prevent concealment, omission, and misreporting. "Whole course" reproductive health service management is stressed, such as promoting hospital delivery through incentives to mid-wives and monitoring throughout the pregnancy, child birth, and post-natal period. Enhanced coordination across public security, family planning, health, and food and drug safety bureaus was shown to be necessary for effectively investigating violations of the "Two Nons" and deaths of baby girls that were not from natural causes.

¶22. (SBU) In addition to the Hainan model, in August 2009 at the Second National Care for Girls Conference, NPFPC Minister LI Bin also cited as models Jiangsu and Hebei Provinces, which had both established a data sharing mechanism between their education and statistical bureaus in order to gain a clearer picture of the gender imbalance situation. Minister Li also emphasized needing more strategies to investigate and prosecute violations of the "Two Nons."

¶23. (SBU) Since the 2008 and 2009 conferences and the national scrutiny of the gender ratio imbalance, numerous provinces have revised their regulations to increase coordination, broaden efforts, and strengthen regulatory controls. In December 2008, Fujian and Henan Provinces issued new regulations, with Fujian emphasizing combating violations of the "Two Nons" through linking the family planning, public security, health, and food and drug safety departments, tightening controls on abortions after 14 weeks (after which fetal sex identification is possible), improving registration of births and deaths, and establishing a public reporting mechanism for violations, including a 2,000RMB (USD 294) reward to informants beginning in November 2009. Henan announced a six-month pilot campaign beginning in March 2009 against the "Two Nons", and cited specific administrative consequences for public officials who are found to have "failed to implement policies to control SRB."

¶24. (SBU) Between July and November 2009, Gansu and Jiangxi Provinces, and the cities of Shanghai and Shenzhen also announced changes to their Care for Girls strategies. Shanghai and Gansu emphasized preferential policies to foster development of girls and assistance to girl-only households. Shanghai announced on July 10 a new plan to improve the care and protection of girl children, including assistance in the form of medical, education and employment benefits to families with only daughters. In Gansu's Changning County, rural families with one girl can apply for a 4,000RMB (USD 588) one time award, a 1,600RMB (USD 235) contribution to their pension savings, and a 20RMB monthly health care stipend. Two daughter families who initiate sterilization or some other long-term contraceptive method can receive a 3,000RMB (USD 441) award from the county government and another 3,000RMB award from the province, plus an 800RMB (USD 118) contribution to their pension savings. Shanghai also proposed inter-province cooperation to

address the needs of its migrant population. Jiangxi's new provincial plan to manage SRB reflects the Hainan model and emphasizes improved family planning service delivery, a data campaign that includes a better birth registration system, and a rewards system for identifying violators of the "Two Nons." Press reports in November 2009 profiled Guangming District in Shenzhen, which as part of their 2009-2010 Care for Girls campaign established a 2,000RMB (USD 294) reward for information on violators of the "Two Nons," set up telephone hotlines, neighborhood mailboxes, and an online reporting system to "mobilize the masses to provide clues," and stepped up investigations of practices at private hospitals and clinics. Since the start of this campaign, the district is reported to have closed three unlicensed clinics and investigated five pharmacies for illegal sale of medicine for inducing abortions.

MIGRANT POPULATION LESS CLEAR

125. (SBU) To date there has been no systematic study of gender imbalance in the migrant population. However, a February 2008 family planning conference in Shanghai reported gender ratio data that showed differences by residency status. In 2007, the sex ratio at birth for residents with a Shanghai household registration (hukou) was close to normal at 107.8, while for permanent residents it was 115. (NOTE: The "permanent resident" category officially includes both those with a Shanghai household registration and those who are documented to have lived in Shanghai for longer than six months. END NOTE) The sex ratio at birth for the migrant population temporarily in Shanghai, at 123, was much higher. However, just as family planning officials have had difficulty monitoring compliance of migrants with family planning policies and requirements (REF B), capturing an accurate picture of and managing the sex ratio imbalance among the migrant population pose similar challenges.

COMMENT

126. (SBU) COMMENT: China has in recent years demonstrated greater openness in discussing the nature and causes of its sex ratio imbalance, and increased urgency about addressing the problem. Some local governments have had some success in managing the problem, including through providing financial incentives to girl-only families and improving social policy supports to target the root causes of the son preference. Furthermore, although China has made noteworthy progress in reducing infant and child mortality and has already met its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for these indicators ahead of schedule, the government has of late delayed goals for normalizing the gender imbalance, perhaps in recognition that it currently lacks effective short term measures to quickly reduce the sex ratio at birth. China has acknowledged that removing barriers to gender equity and promoting the value of girls, as well as building an adequate old-age social security, are key to achieving a widespread, lasting solution. Beyond its continued rhetoric, however, the central government also must provide the resources necessary for provinces to fulfill their mandates for delivering services geared toward the care, protection, and promotion of girls. Local commitment and follow through also must be strengthened and officials held accountable for humanely reducing the sex ratio imbalance. END COMMENT.

HUNTSMAN